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## **BENGALI STAGE**



# BENGALI STAGE

1795—1873.

BY  
BRAJENDRA NATH BANERJEE

With a Foreword by  
DR. SUNITI KUMAR CHATTERJI, M.A. (Cal.), D.LIT. (London)  
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**To**  
**Sj. Khagendra Nath Chatterjee**  
**AS A TOKEN OF REGARD**





## FOREWORD

Mr. Brajendra Nath Banerjee's work on the Bengali Stage, which I feel very happy to introduce to the public interested not only in Bengali literature and in the development of Indian culture in the 19th century but also in the history of the drama, is a well-documented objective study of the question, and it maintains the author's high reputation as one of our foremost research workers into the history of the literature and culture of Bengal in the 18th and 19th centuries. Mr. Banerjee has previously published a number of significant works on the development of modern literature in the vernacular in this side of India, and his books and papers on journalism in Bengal and on the drama in Bengali will remain authoritative for some time to come. His editions of early and mid-19th century Bengali classics and his excursions into biography and bibliography of some of the early modern writers of Bengali are well known—they may be said to be not only pioneer works in some cases but also to set the standard. In the present little volume we have a history of the Bengali theatre from the opening of the first public stage in Calcutta by that remarkable literary adventurer from Russia, Herasim Lebedeff, in the year 1795, to the year 1873, when the first Bengali stage the *National Theatre* ended its short life, to be followed by other and more long-lived successors to carry on the stage tradition that became established in Bengal. The various attempts amateurish and professional to set up a true theatre in Bengali from 1795 onwards are given in detail, with references to and quotations from contemporary documents; and the fact that the author is scrupulously taking up the work of a chronicler rather than an interpreter gives his work a very high documentary importance. The views and

opinions of contemporary literary men culled from their letters, criticisms from the press, advertisements and other similar evidence in the narration of this chronicle have also their permanent value. As an appendix we have a chronology of the works of the first regular dramatists of Bengal from the middle of the 19th century onwards.

The Bengali Stage from the seventies of the 19th century onwards resembled the great Elizabethan Stage of the 16th-17th centuries and the French Stage of the 17th century in giving to us a series of remarkable actor-dramatists, among whom we have Girish Chandra Ghosh and Amrita Lal Basu, both of them in the forefront of modern Bengali literature, whom we delight in calling respectively the Shakspeare and the Moliere of Bengal. A number of great actors and actresses also have lent their names in the creation of a histrionic tradition, which like the dramaturgic one is quite a living one in present-day Bengal. All that story remains to be told. Mr. Banerjee has brought the story up to the time when the regular Bengali public stage came into being in the early seventies of the last century, and we hope some day he will take up the narrative and bring the story up to the present day, when the stage seems to be hard beset by the shadow-play, after quite a glorious half-a-century and more of existence which has richly enlarged the wealth of Bengali literature. We hope that the present work is a prelude to a bigger and a more comprehensive history of the Bengali stage from Mr. Banerjee, and we are sure it will be well-received on its own merits.

The University,  
Calcutta,  
8 January 1948.

SUNITI KUMAR CHATTERJI

# Bengali Stage

## INTRODUCTION

**W**HEN the cultural history of modern India comes to be written, Calcutta need not have any doubt about its place in it. This history, above everything else, will be a history of the reaction and response of an Eastern people to Western influences, and, in this process, Calcutta has stood as the clearing house of the new ideas. Here it was that Rammohun Roy came when he felt he was ripe for his mission, and it was the citizens of Calcutta who established, in the Hindu College, the first college for English education in this country. The students of this college may fairly claim to be the earliest batch of those modern orientals, who are so hopelessly divided against themselves by the inner conflict that is going on within their souls, and are yet so determinedly hopeful that this struggle shall at last end in a synthesis. Almost everything that we can claim as the achievement of modern India,—in the field of art, literature, science, religious and political thought, and scholarship,—has had Calcutta as its cradle. Even the first Hindi newspaper was published in Calcutta.

This readiness of Calcutta to receive, adapt and transmit new influences is seen in small as well as great things, and

this is no less true of the particular field of cultural activity of which we are going to speak here. Calcutta has always taken very kindly to the theatre. Her rich men have not stinted money in fostering the delicate and exotic plant till it had taken firm root in the soil of the country, while her other sons, if they could not spare money, have never grudged the no less needed support of enthusiasm. I have told the story of the Bengali stage at some length and from contemporary sources, particularly newspapers, in my *Bangiya Natyashalar Itihas* (The History of the Bengali stage). What I shall attempt here will be to give the outlines of that history for the busy man.

## LEBEDEFF'S BENGALI THEATRE

**T**HE first Bengali theatre in Calcutta was born as early as 1795 and stands as an isolated episode. This is due to the fact that the first organizer of a Bengali theatre in which a play in Bengali was staged by Bengali actors and actresses, was not a native of the country, but an adventurer from far-off Russia. His name was Herasim Lebedeff. He drifted to Calcutta towards the end of the eighteenth century and established a theatre at 25, Doomtullah, the present Ezra Street. After a few years he went away to England and, in 1801, published *A Grammar of the Pure and Mixed East Indian Dialects* there. In the Introduction to this book he tells the story of his theatre himself :—

I translated too English dramatic pieces, namely, "The Disguise," and "Love is the Best Doctor," into the Bengal language ; and having observed that the Indians preferred mimicry and drollery to plain grave solid sense, however purely expressed—I therefore fixed on those plays, and which were most pleasantly filled up with a groupe of watchmen, *chokey-dars* ; savoyards *canera* ; thieves, *ghoonia* ; lawyers, *gumosta* ; and amongst the rest a corps of petty plunderers.

When my translation was finished, I invited several learned Pundits, who perused the work very attentively ; and I then had the opportunity of observing those sentences, which appeared to them most pleasing, and which most excited emotion ; and I presume I do not much flatter myself, when I affirm that by this translation the spirit of both the comic and serious scenes were much heightened, and which would in vain be imitated by any European, who did not possess the advantage of such an instructor as I had the extraordinary good fortune to procure.

After the approbation of the Pundits—*Golucknatdash*, my Linguist, made me a proposal, that if I chose to present this play publicly, he would engage to supply me with actors of both sexes from among the natives : with which idea I was exceedingly pleased. I, therefore, to bring to view my undertaking, for the benefit of the European public, without delay, solicited the Governor-General—Sir John Shore, (now Lord Teignmouth) for a regular licence, who granted it to me without hesitation.

Thus fortified by patronage, and anxious to exhibit, I set about building a commodious Theatre, on a plan of my own, in Dom-Tollah, (Dome-Lane) in the centre of Calcutta; and in the mean while I employed my Linguist to procure native actors of both sexes,—in three months both Theatre and Actors were ready for representation of *The Disguise*, which I accordingly produced to the Public in the Bengal language, on the 27th of November, 1795; and again on the 21st, of March, 1796. (Pp. vi—vii).

When Lebedeff's preparations had neared completion, he announced the project to the citizens of Calcutta. In the *Calcutta Gazette* for November 5, 1795, is to be found the following advertisement:

*By Permission of the Honorable the  
Governor-General.*

---

MR. LEBEDEFF'S  
New Theatre in the Doomtullah,  
Decorated in the Bengallee Style  
will be opened very shortly, with a Play called  
THE DISGUISE,  
The Characters to be supported by Performers  
of both sexes.  
To commence with Vocal and Instrumental  
Music, called  
THE INDIAN SERENADE.

---

To those Musical Instruments, which are held in esteem by the Bengallees, will be added European. The words of the much admired Poet *Shree Bharot Chondro Ray*, are set to Music.

Between The Acts.

Some amusing Curiosities will be introduced.

---

The Day for Exhibition, together with a particular detail of the Performance, will be notified in the course of the next week.

Three weeks later, in the *Calcutta Gazette* for November 26, Lebedeff announced:

BENGALLY THEATRE.  
No. 25, Doomtullah.  
MR. LEBEDEFF

Has the honor to acquaint the Ladies and  
Gentlemen of the Settlement,  
That His  
THEATRE,  
Will be Opened  
TO-MORROW, FRIDAY, 27th Inst.  
WITH A COMEDY,  
Called  
THE DISGUISE.

---

The Play to commence at 8 o'Clock precisely.

---

Tickets to be had at his Theatre.

|                |     |     |           |
|----------------|-----|-----|-----------|
| Boxes and Pit, | ... | ... | Sa. Rs. 8 |
| Gallery,       | ... | ... | " " 4     |

The performance was apparently a great success, for Lebedeff raised the price of his tickets to one gold *mohur* for the second day, which was March 21, 1796. On this occasion he limited the seats to two hundred and requested his customers to send for "Tickets, and the account of the plot and scenes of the Dramas on or before Saturday, the 19th." This performance, too, was highly successful and pleased with the response and patronage he had got, Lebedeff made the following public acknowledgment in the *Calcutta Gazette* for March 24, 1796 :

#### BENGALLY THEATRE.

Mr. LEBEDEFF, respectfully acknowledges the very distinguished Patronage, the Ladies and Gentlemen of this Settlement Subscribers to his Second BENGALLY PLAY, honoured him with, and begs leave to assure them, he has the most grateful sense of the very liberal support afforded him on this occasion, and intreats they will be pleased to accept his warmest Thanks.

March 24, 1796.

With this *l'envoi* the ingenious foreigner flitted out of the life of the people of Calcutta.



## PRASANNA KUMAR TAGORE'S HINDU THEATRE

**M**ORE than forty years lie between this first staging of Bengali plays and the second. During this time we hear very little about plays and acting among the people of Calcutta. But towards the end of this period, the yearning was already vocal. It was an age of transition, when, under the influence of a new system of education, a demand was crystallizing for a theatre of the European type. Lebedeff's Bengali play was a *tour de force*. In his time English education and influence had not gone far enough for the people of Bengal to feel the want of novel amusements. They were still satisfied with their traditional *yatras*, *panchalis*, etc., though even these were losing their rigidity through the leavening of new ideas. *Colly Rajah's Yatra*, which was introduced towards the beginning of 1822 and for which it has sometimes been wrongly claimed that it was the next Bengali play after Lebedeff's, was a new departure of this kind. But it is doubtful whether it was even a *yatra*, properly so-called. A better example of a *yatra* of the new type is to be found in the *Sumachar Durpun* for May 4, 1822, in which it was announced that some residents of Bhowanipur were casting the story of Nala and Damayanti from the Mahabharata into the *yatra* form and collecting money for performing it. This *yatra*, for which the well-known poet-musician Ram Bose wrote some songs, was performed on 6th July, 1822.

These pieces were undoubtedly departures from the older *yatra* form. But they were not genuine dramas or dramatic performances. As a matter of fact, the Bengali drama did not grow out of the Bengali *yatra*, nor did the demand for a new kind of theatre come from the class

which, as a rule, patronized *yatras*. The origin of the Bengali stage is to be sought in the desire for newer and less archaic amusements felt by a generation, which had received a good English education. The more well-to-do among them went to the English play-houses of Calcutta. It was apparently the voice of Bengalis of this class, which was echoed by the *Samachar Chandrika* when it pleaded for a native theatre in Calcutta after the English example. This note, which appeared in one of its issues, was reproduced in the *Asiatic Journal* for August, 1826 :

In this extensive city public institutions of various kinds and novel descriptions have lately sprung up for the improvement and gratification of its inhabitants ; but their amusement has not yet been consulted, and they have not, like the English community, any place of public entertainment. In former times, actors and actresses were attached to the courts of the princes of India, who represented plays, and charmed the audience with graceful poetry and music, and impassioned action. We have had of late some Saker Jatras exhibited, which though not perfect, gave great diversion to the people ; they have been, however, unfrequent. It is therefore very desirable, that men of wealth and rank should associate and establish a theatre on the principle of shares, as the English gentlemen have done, and retaining qualified persons on fixed salaries, exhibit a new performance of song and poetry once a month, conformably to the written *nataks* or plays, and under the authority of a manager ; such a plan will promote the pleasure of all classes of society. (*Asiatic Intelligence*—Calcutta, p. 214.)

The new generation in Bengal, which had studied English literature with something like the same fervour with which Renaissance scholars had studied Greek and Latin, were as full of enthusiasm for the new as they were contemptuous for the old. What they did, at first, was, therefore, not to create a Bengali theatre presenting Bengali dramas but to organize amateur English theatricals in which Shakespeare and translations of Sanskrit dramatic classics were staged. It was these amateur theatricals, set up and performed by Bengalis, which were the real forerunners of the Bengali stage of to-day.

The first theatre of this kind was one in the organization of which a famous son of Calcutta, Prasanna Kumar Tagore, took a leading part. For this reason it was popularly called after him as "Prasanna Kumar Tagore's Theatre," though its real name was the "Hindu Theatre." The project began to take shape in September, 1831. The *East-Indian* announced :

*Hindoo Theatrical Association* —On Sunday last (11th September), a meeting was called by Baboo Prussunno Comar Thakoor, to take into consideration a proposal for establishing a native theatre. It was attended by a select few, who resolved, first, that theatres were useful ; second, that an association, to be called the Hindoo Theatrical Association, be established ; third, that a managing committee be formed to take into consideration matters relative to such an undertaking. The following gentlemen were elected members of the committee ; Babus Prusunno Comar Thakoor, Sreekissen Singh, Kishenchunder Dutt, Gungachurn Sen, Madhabchunder Mullick, Tarachand Chuckerbuttee, and Hurachandra Ghose.....(Quoted by the *Asiatic Journal* for April, 1832).

After rather more than three months of preparation the theatre opened on December 28 with the staging of *Uttara-Ramcharita* (a translation of Bhavabhuti's famous drama by Wilson) and a portion of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in the garden house of Prasanna Kumar Tagore at Narkeldanga. Admission was, of course, by invitation, and among the notabilities present were Sir Edward Ryan, Col. Young and Rajah Radhakanta Deb. The Hindu Theatre, however, was not a sturdy growth. It gave only one other performance of a slight farce called *Nothing Superfluous* a few months later (March 29, 1832) and then came to an end, or at any rate was not heard of any more. Prasanna Kumar Tagore's theatre was hardly anything more than the enlarged edition of a college dramatic club, and what was more the plays staged in it being in English, its appeal was both artificial and restricted. It is no wonder, therefore, that it was very short lived.

## STAGING OF VIDYASUNDAR— A BENGALI'S ENTERPRISE

**T**HE next theatre in Calcutta deserved better to be called an achievement and a novelty. It was the fruit of the enthusiasm and enterprise of Nabin Chandra Bose, a citizen of north Calcutta, the cradle and nursery, so to say, of the Bengali stage. Nabin Bose set up a theatre in his own house, the site of which is now occupied by the Shambazar Tram Depot and did not commit the mistake of presenting English plays. His theatre, which came into existence about 1833 and staged four or five Bengali plays every year, is described in the *Hindu Pioneer* for October 22, 1835, a fortnightly paper started by the old students of the Hindu College :—

*The Native Theatre.*—This private theatre, got up about two years ago, is still supported by Babu Nobinchandar Bose. It is situated in the residence of the proprietor, at Sham Bazar, where four or five plays are acted during the year. These are native performances, by people entirely Hindus, after the English fashion, in the vernacular language of their country ; and what elates us with joy, as it should do all the friends of Indian improvement, is, that the fair sex of Bengal are always seen on the stage, as the female parts are almost exclusively performed by Hindu women.

I have not come across any notice of the earlier performances in this theatre, but in October, 1835 it staged the familiar Bengali tale of Vidyasundar. A long and enthusiastic account of this play appeared in the *Hindu Pioneer* :—

We had the pleasure of attending at a play one evening during the last full moon [6 Octr.] ; and we must acknowledge that we were highly delighted. The house was crowded by upwards of a thousand visitors, of all sorts, Hindus, Mahammadans, and some Europeans and East Indians, who were equally delighted. The play commenced a little before 12 o'clock, and continued, the next day, till half past six

in the morning. We were present from the beginning and witnessed almost the whole representation with the exception of the last two scenes. The subject of the performance was *Bidya Sundar*. It is tragi-comic, and one of the master pieces in Bengali, by the celebrated Bharut Chandar. I need scarcely explain the details of the play, which is commonly known by every person who can read a little of Bengali, yet for the sake of our English readers we must observe that this play is much like that of *Romeo and Juliet* in Shakespeare. It commenced with the music of the Orchestra which was very pleasing. The native musical instruments, such as the *sitar*, the *saranghi*, the *pakhwas*, and others were played by Hindus, almost all Brahmans, among them the violin was admirably managed by Babu Brojonath Goshain, who received frequent applauses from the surrounding visitors; but unfortunately he was but imperfectly heard by the assembly. Before the curtain was drawn a prayer was sung to the Almighty, a Hindu custom in such ceremonies, and prologues were chaunted likewise previous to the opening of every scene, explaining the subject of the representation. The scenery was generally imperfect, the perspective of the pictures, the clouds, the water, were all failures; they denoted both want of taste and sacrifice of judicious principles, and the latter were scarcely distinguished except by the one being placed above the other. Though framed by native printers they would have been much superior had they been executed by careful hands. The house of Raja *Biru Singha* and the apartment of his daughter were however done tolerably well. The part of *Sundar*, the hero of the poem, was played by a young lad Shamacharn Banarji of Barranagore, who in spite of his praiseworthy efforts did not do entire justice to his performance. It is a character which affords sufficient opportunity to display theatrical talents by the frequent and sudden change of pantomime, and by playing such tricks as to prevent the Raja, who is the father of the heroine of the play, from detecting the amorous plot. Young *Shamacharn* tried occasionally to vary the expression of his feelings, but his gestures seemed to be studied, and his motions stiff. The parts of the Raja and others were performed to the satisfaction of the whole audience.

The female characters in particular were excellent. The part of *Bidya* (daughter of Raja Bira Singha) the lover of *Sundar* was played by *Radha Moni* (generally called *Moni*) a girl of nearly sixteen years of age, was very ably sustained; her graceful motions, her sweet voice, and her love tricks with *Sundar*, filled the minds of the audience with rapture and delight. She never failed as long as she was on the stage. The sudden change of her countenance amidst her joys and her lamentations, her words so pathetic, and her motions so truly expressive, when informed

that her lover was detected, and when he was dragged before her father, were highly creditable to herself and to the stage. When apprised that *Sundar* was ordered to be executed her attendants tried in vain to console her, she dropped down and fainted, and on recovering, through the care of her attendants, fell senseless again and the audience was left for some time in awful silence. That a person, uneducated as she is, and unacquainted with the niceties of her vernacular language, should perform a part so difficult with general satisfaction and receive loud and frequent applauses, was indeed quite unexpected. The other female characters were equally well performed and amongst the rest we must not omit to mention that the part of the *Rani* or wife of *Raj*, *Bira Singha*, and that of *Malini* (a name applied to women who deal in flowers) were acted by an elderly woman *Jay Durga*, who did justice to both characters in the two fold capacity, she eminently appeared amongst the other performers, and delighted the hearers with her songs, and another woman *Raj Kumari*, usually called *Raju*, played the part of a maid servant to *Bidya*, if not in a superior manner, yet as able as *Jay Durga*.

To this writer the most attractive part of the play was the acting of the women's parts by the Bengali actresses. He writes about them with warmth and does not hesitate to draw the moral :—

We rejoice that in the midst of ignorance such examples are produced which are beyond what we could have expected. Ought not the very sight of these girls induce our native visitors present on this occasion to spare no time in educating their wives and daughters? Had this girl, who made such a capital figure on the stage, been educated in the study of her vernacular language, I, as a Hindu, beg my countrymen to consider how her talents would have shown! Was not her ingenuity, though she only spoke by rote, sufficient to convince those who charge Nature for being partial to men that Hindu females are as well fitted to receive education as their superior lords? Was not this display sufficient to convince the Hindu visitors that a woman, as long as she is devoid of education, is a perfect blank in society? If they still neglect this important consideration after noble and fresh examples of the mental power of our females their hearts must be cold and their minds without feeling.

Such is the Native Theatre, and such is the way in which it is conducted. The proprietor, Babu *Nobinchundar Bose*, deserves our highest praise for endeavouring to raise the character of our mistaken though truly praiseworthy women. Although such private exhibitions

are generally expensive, yet we see the Rahn encouraging it both with personal exertions and pecuniary assistance. It is a matter of joy that a rich native has thus come forward to further active measures for the improvement of the friends of India. May his example be followed by an opulent community? Let us behold a great moral revolution in our country, which in time must needs raise India to a state of merited renown.

We wish every success to this praiseworthy undertaking. We entertain no doubt of its continuance as long as the proprietor perseveres in his zealous exertions. Let him employ effectual means for the prevention of the debasing system now existing in regard to Hindu females. Let him devise new methods of improvement; and above all resolutely keep this Theatre up and like the *Hindu Theatre*, not suffer it to meet with a death-blow in its very origin. This will be doing much real good to society and earning the unqualified praise from the public. Such deeds speak for themselves; they attract glory from all quarters, and thus are worthy men crowned with unfading splendour!

But the dramatic critic of the *Hindu Pioneer* was not to have the last say in the matter. There were others who held quite a different opinion about these actresses and, as their mouthpiece, the *Englishman and Military Chronicle* administered a severe rebuke to the *Hindu Pioneer* :—

*Hindu Theatricals* :—We insert a letter respecting the account of certain Hindu Theatricals which we copied from the *Pioneer*. Our correspondent, who is we know well informed, has sufficiently shewn that so far from such Theatricals being attended with any advantage, moral or intellectual to the Hindus, it behoves every friend to the people to discourage such exhibitions, which are equally devoid of novelty, utility and even decency. Our correspondent has lifted the veil with which the writer of the sketch sought to screen the real character of these exhibitions, and we hope we shall hear no more of them in the *Hindu Pioneer* unless it be to denounce them.

Here we already have a foretaste of the puritanical mutterings of another age.

## SHAKESPEARE ON THE BENGALI STAGE

**N**ABIN Bose's theatre came to an obscure end some time after this, and for some years we hear very little about theatrical performances in Calcutta. But the taste for the theatre which had been created did not die out, though it did not always find a successful or ambitious channel of expression. Towards the beginning of 1840 there was an attempt to establish a theatre on the lines of Prasanna Kumar Tagore's Hindu Theatre. This apparently came to nothing, and for some years at any rate, acting was confined to recitations in schools and colleges. One performance of this kind, which was reported in newspapers, was that which took place at a prize distribution of the Hindu College at the Government House, Calcutta, on March 29, 1837. On this occasion the boys recited parts of the *Merchant of Venice* and also a miscellany of poetic and dramatic pieces. A far more serious, and almost sensational, attempt to stage Shakespeare in Calcutta was made by the students of the David Hare Academy, sixteen years later.

In the meanwhile there was an exhibition of the talents of a Bengali actor which is well worth mentioning. In 1848 a Bengali actor named Vaishnav Charan Addy twice acted the part of Othello with great credit at the *Sans Souci* Theatre on August 17 and September 12. This information is given in the Bengali paper, *Sambad Prabhakar*, which wrote with pride and enthusiasm of this acting, and as a matter of fact it was very creditable indeed that a Bengali could give so good an account of himself in an English play before a European audience.

To come back now to the students of the David Hare Academy. This school had been established on August 7,



1851, and its students staged a substantial portion of *The Merchant of Venice* on February 16, 1853. The sensation that this performance created may be judged from the following extract from the *Sambad Prabhakar* of February 10, 1853 :—

A new function will take place in the evening of the prize distribution day of the David Hare Academy. Such an entertaining affair has never yet been witnessed anywhere in Bengal. A very fine stage is being set up and decorated within the school by some skilled Englishmen. The students will act the famous play called *The Merchant of Venice* by Shakespeare Sahib on this stage, and display their learning. S. Rajendra Dutt of Malanga, who is well known for his generosity, is taking special interest in this performance. The students will gain great reputation if they can give proof of their ability in this performance. Though the school is already famous, its success in this matter will spread its fame all over Bengal.—(Translated)

The performance was repeated on February 24. It was apparently very successful, for the *Sambad Prabhakar* writes that six or seven hundred highly educated and wealthy gentlemen, including Englishmen and English women, came to see it and were highly pleased with the acting, which was considered to be almost equal to that of the Sans Souci Theatre. We have it from the *Bengal Hurkaru and India Gazette* that the students of the school were trained for the play by Mr. Clinger, the Head Master of the English Department of the Calcutta Madrasa.

The example of the David Hare Academy was followed shortly by its rival institution—The Oriental Seminary. This school set up a regular theatre which was called the Oriental Theatre, and like the David Hare Academy staged Shakespeare. On April 7, 1853 the *Bengal Hurkaru* informed its readers that the senior pupils of the Oriental Seminary had raised eight hundred rupees by subscription among themselves in order to establish a school theatre in which they would stage Shakespeare. After five months of preparation the theatre at last opened on September 26,

with the performance of *Othello*. Among the distinguished Indians present were Rajah Pratap Chandra and Ramgopal Ghosh, while the European community was represented by Charles Allen, Lushington, Seton Ker and other influential promoters of education. The *Bengal Hurkaru*, which noticed the play, was pleased with the acting and wrote :—

The character which we had feared would be the worst represented, was the best represented. *Iago* by Baboo Proomith Dey, was acted with an evident knowledge of the character the mode in which they acquitted themselves must have given much satisfaction to every member of the audience, who cares for the intellectual improvement of his native fellow citizens (28th September, 1853.)

The students of the Oriental Seminary, too, were trained by Mr. Clinger, but an English lady, named Miss Clara Ellis, also had a share in their training. The Oriental Theatre staged *Othello* for the second time on October 5, 1853, and gave a performance of *The Merchant of Venice* on March 2, 1854. When this play was repeated on March 17, the part of Portia was performed by a European lady—Mrs. Greig.

For some reason or other the Oriental Theatre seems to have remained closed for nearly a year. It was, however, revived early in 1855. The last pieces to be acted in this theatre were Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, and *Amateurs*, a farce written by Mr. H. M. Parker of the Bengal Civil Service. The *Hindoo Patriot* made some just observations on this occasion :—

After the lapse of nearly a year, the Oriental Theatre re opened on the 15th instant with the performance of Shakespeare's *Henry IV*. part first, and a farce entitled the *Amateurs*, written expressly for the Chowringhee Theatre by Henry Meredith Parker C S. in those days in which civilians and military men did not deem it vulgar to amuse themselves with the very rational pleasures of the stage. The managers of the Oriental Theatre in their endeavours to rationalise a more intellectual species of amusement than their countrymen were hitherto accustomed to throw away their money upon, complain of having had

to encounter heavy losses. Their complaint is the more mortifying from the fact that those who have the power to aid them successfully, although hugely patronising the despicable *tamashas* that abound in the country—bullbull fights and dancing girls,—would not lay out a farthing for the thousand times more gratifying shews which the Theatre is capable of affording. Perhaps the majority of the rich in Calcutta, are from their ignorance of the English language, insusceptible of the exquisite delight which an English play well acted can impart to the spectator. Yet if even all those whose education has furnished them with a refined taste and enables them to appreciate the Drama of the west, took that interest in the new theatre which they ought to take, its managers could not certainly despair of success. Shakespeare's plays acted by Hindoo youths is a novelty which none assuredly should miss, and such acting as we observed at the Oriental Theatre on Thursday last may well make us proud of the versatile and extraordinary genius of our countrymen. We admit that all the characters in the play were not so well represented as we could wish; yet Falstaff was a trump and king Henry spoke and gesticulated like a king. We wondered specially at the way in which the young man who personated the former character went through his part, mimicking the corpulent old blackguard in voice and gesture so remarkably that the audience was in a roar of laughter. The pronunciation of some of the actors was excellent; that of the rest, not altogether bad.... We again wish that a generous public will encourage these efforts to establish a source of rational amusement in Calcutta and revive gradually the dramatic spirit of our countrymen. We wish also that the managers of the Oriental Theatre will hereafter think of getting up Bengallee plays after the manner of our very spirited brethren of Lombay who are now starring it at the Grant Road Theatre. (February 22, 1855.)

The next dramatic club to take up Shakespeare was not attached to any school. It was the Jorasanko Theatre, which was housed in the residence of Pyari Mohan Basu, a nephew of Nabin Chandra Bose, the dramatic enthusiast. This theatre gave a performance of *Julius Caesar* on May 3, 1854. The *Hindoo Patriot* was not at all pleased with the acting and it gave the organizers this advice: "Let the Jorasankowallahs take in hand a couple of good Bengali plays and we will promise them success"—an advice which strikes the keynote of the coming age.

## THE BENGALI STAGE COMES OF AGE

**A**T the opening of the second half of the nineteenth century, the Bengali stage was already more than fifty years old, but its achievements were still negligible. All the shortlived private theatres which had come into being one after another during these years had not succeeded in creating a continuous dramatic tradition in the country, and what was more there was no repertory of Bengali plays in existence. The close of the sixth decade of the nineteenth century, however, brought a change. The year 1857 witnessed a sudden outburst of theatrical activity in Calcutta, which not only resulted in the opening of some extremely successful private theatres but also helped in a large measure in the creation of a genuine dramatic literature in Bengali, which had been foreshadowed by a few minor pieces only before that time.

The event which marks the beginning of this new phase in the history of the Bengali stage is the performance of *Abhijnan Sakuntala* by Nanda Kumar Roy in January, 1857 at the house of a famous citizen of Calcutta—Chhatu Babu. This performance, which was followed in quick succession by the setting up of other private theatres and the staging of many new plays, may very properly be regarded as a landmark. The importance of this new development was as apparent to the contemporaries as it is to us, for, after the first performance on January 30, 1857 we find *The Hindoo Patriot* writing :

*The Hindoo Theatre.*—It is not long since Calcutta was regaled with histrionic exhibition under the auspices of native amateurs, when some of the best plays of Shakespeare were acted upon the stage by young Hindoos who appeared to enter into the spirit of the characters they personated. Although the full measure of success which was anticipated could not be realised, yet the public, and specially the native community,

showed a taste for such performances, which promised the best results, if the managers of the Theatre had only the tact to profit by the happy opportunity. Instead, however, of fostering by repeated and well-got-up performances the taste thus created, they permitted minor jealousies and a spirit of contention to demolish the good they had achieved ; and the curtain fell upon their stage to be lifted up no more. Years rolled away. We had well nigh forgotten that we ever had such a thing as a theatre, when an invitation card surprised us with the fact that another Bengallee stage had risen like a phoenix upon the ashes of its predecessor. The announcement had the further attraction that the play announced was a genuine Bengallee one, being a translation of the well-known dramatic execution of Kally Doss—the Saccoontollah. We were still more delighted to learn that the theatre had been got up by the grandsons of the late Baboo Ashootosh Dey, the stage having been erected at the family residence of the deceased millionaire, and partaking of the character of a private theatrical. It is not every day that native gentlemen of wealth and position are observed to spend money on amusements of a rational kind. It is altogether a relief to contemplate our youthful aristocracy apart from the low and grovelling pursuits which too unfortunately constitute the normal condition of many of that body. The drama has in all ages and with all nations formed one of the principal sources of a pure amusement. In India, it had at one time attained the highest state of perfection. But a combination of disastrous circumstances tended to annihilate the freedom of our race, and simultaneously with the loss of liberty we lost every blessing which chastened manners and embellished life. Foreigners contemplate with ecstasy the genius of our poets. The universities of Europe are not tired of poring over the musty tomes of ancient Sanskrit literature. The Saccoontolah of Kalidas has undergone the most finished translations in Germany and in England. But amongst the people for whose forefathers the immortal bard taxed his genius, his admirable work is a sealed book almost. A few only have read it in the original, and a very contemptible number in the diluted form even of a translation. The play is admirably fitted for the stage. We had abundant evidence of the fact from the performance which came off on the night of the 30th instant [ultimo]. The young gentleman who personated Saccoontolah looked really grand and queenly in his gestures and address, and did great justice to the part he was enacting. The other amateurs also succeeded in creating an effect. We are told that the performers have not had the benefit of any lessons from practised actors, and this circumstance enables us to accord great credit to exertions undoubtedly very

well directed. We are confident that with a little polishing the corps dramatique will be able to make a brilliant debut.

The theatre which staged *Sakuntala* was established by the grandsons of Ashutosh Deb, better known as Chhatu Babu. A second performance of the same play took place a few weeks later on February 22, 1857, before an audience of some four hundred gentlemen, and a very appreciative notice of the performance appeared in the *Sambad Prabha-kar* for February 26, 1857. The next play which was staged here with great pomp on September 5, 1857 was *Mahashweta* by Manimohan Sarkar.

The fashions of Calcutta, then as now, did not take long to spread into the mofussil. The setting up of the new theatres in Calcutta in 1857 was next year followed by the establishment of another at Janai, in the vicinity of Calcutta, at which also the first play presented was *Sakuntala*.

These performances of *Sakuntala* were followed by a more sensational dramatic event in the first week of March of the same year. This was the acting of Ramnarayan Tarkaratna's *Kulin Kulasarvasva* at the house of Babu Ramjay Bysack of Natunbazar. The dramas put on the stage till then were adaptations or translations. Ramnarayan was perhaps the first writer in Bengal to utilize a social question of the day and thus to write a play, which in every sense was original. Kulin polygamy was being vigorously attacked in those days by the social reformers of Bengal, and it was this institution which furnished the theme for Ramnarayan's new drama. The play was greeted with enthusiasm by the reformists, and created a sensation everywhere. The first performance of this play took place in the first week of March, 1857. We find the *Hindoo Patriot* quoting the *Education Gazette* on March 19, 1857 :

*Friday, the 13th March.*—The *Educational Gazette* states that the well-known farce of Koolino Kooloshorbushya was acted in the private

residence of a Baboo in Calcutta with great success. We are glad to see these new pieces acted.

We learn from the *Sambad Prabhakar* of March 25, 1858 that this performance was shortly followed by another in the same house, while a third performance came off on March 22, 1858 at the house of Gadadhar Set of Barabazar. On this occasion, many distinguished Bengalis including Isvar Chandra Vidyasagar, Nagendra Nath Tagore, Kishori Chand Mittra were present among the audience.

*Kulin Kulasarvasva* was also acted at the house of Narottam Pal of Chinsurah on July 3, 1858, and on the 15th following the *Hindoo Patriot* wrote about it :

The acting of the *Kooln-o-Kooloshurboshuro* Natuck at Chinsurah has, it appears, given great offence to the Koolins of the locality....The acting took place in the house of a gentleman of the Banya caste, and the Colin Brahmins intend, it is said, to retaliate in kind.

## THE APOGEE OF AMATEUR THEATRICALS

**T**HE VIDYOTSAHINI THEATRE.—It may rightly be said that the enthusiasm for the theatre, which passed over Bengali society in the middle of the nineteenth century found its greatest achievement in the Belgachia Theatre. But before speaking about this theatre it is necessary to refer to another which shortly preceded it. This was the Vidyotsahini Theatre, formed as an appendage to the Vidyotsahini Sabha, a literary club, which owed its existence to the patronage of Kaliprasanna Singh, the well-known Bengali writer and patron of letters. The Vidyotsahini Theatre was founded in 1856 and opened on April 11 of the following year with the performance of *Veni-samhar*, a Sanskrit drama rendered into Bengali by Ramnarayan Tarkaratna. The play came off before a respectable Indian and European audience and was received with applause. Kaliprasanna himself took one of the leading parts and acted it with great credit.

The success of this venture encouraged Kaliprasanna to write dramas himself and the outcome was a Bengali translation of Kalidasa's famous play, *Vikramorvasi*. This book came out in September, 1857 and the performance took place on the 24th November following. Kaliprasanna himself appearing in the role of King Pururaba.

The third play to be staged by the Vidyotsahini Theatre was *Savitri-Satyavan*, also a work of Kaliprasanna.

**THE BELGACHIA THEATRE.**—We may now describe one of the most brilliant and successful of the early theatres in Bengal—the Belgachia Theatre. It owed its birth to the enthusiasm and munificence of Raja Pratap Chunder Singh and Issur Chunder Singh of Paikpara, who took an active part in the organization of the theatre and staging of the



plays. They were enthusiastically supported in this venture by a band of English educated young men. The sensation, which this theatre created may be guessed from the following account of a contemporary. After referring to the earlier theatrical ventures, Gaurdas Bysack, the friend of Michael Madhusudan Dutt, goes on to say :—

But it was not till our *Barra* and *Chota Rajas* of Paikpara, as Pratap Chunder and Issur Chunder Singhs were lovingly called and known,...appeared in the field, that the native theatre took deep root, and a native orchestra was organized. In the construction of this orchestra Khetter Mohun Gossain, a genius in music, and Babu Jadu Nath Paul had the principal hand.

The Gossain for the first time put into notation some of the native tunes and *ragas* and thus created a native Band known as the Belgatchia Amateur Band, headed by Babu Jadu Nath Paul....

To say that the Belgatchia Theatre scored a brilliant success, is to repeat a truism that has passed into a proverb. It achieved a success unparalleled in the annals of Amateur Theatricals in this country. The graceful stage, the superb sceneries, the stirring orchestra, the gorgeous dresses, the costly appurtenances, the splendid get up of the whole concern, were worthy of the brother Rajas, and the genius of their intimate friend Maharaja Sir Jotindro Mohun Tagore, an accomplished connoisseur. The performance of a single play, *Ratnavali*, which alone cost the Rajas ten thousand rupees, realized the idea, and established the character of the real Hindu Drama with the improvements, suited to the taste of an advanced age.

The Dramatic Corps was drawn from the flower of our educated youth. Among the actors, Babu Keshub Chunder Ganguli stood pre-eminent. Endowed by nature with histrionic talents of no mean order, he represented the *Vidushaka* (Jester) with such life-like reality, and so rich a fund of humour, as to be styled the Garrick of our Bengali stage. Raja Issur Chunder Singh, who looked a prince every inch, encased in mail coat armour, with a jewelled sword hanging by his side, acted his part, with wonderful effect, befitting the character of a generalissimo.... The manner in which the other actors, one and all, acquitted themselves, met with the warmest applause from the audience,—an audience composed of the *élite* of Calcutta, the cream of European and Native society. Eminent Government officials and high non-official gentlemen who witnessed the performances spoke of the "exquisite treat" they had enjoyed, as heightening their idea of our Indian music and of our Indian

stage. The Lieutenant-Governor, Sir Frederick Halliday, who was present with his family, was so delighted with the acting of Babu Kesbub Chunder that he complimented him on his extraordinary dramatic talents. He said that looking at his serious and sedate appearance one could hardly believe him capable of acting so capitably the part of the Jester.

This theatre opened on July 31, 1858 with the performance of *Ratnavali*, a Bengali drama by Ramnarayan Tarkaratna. It was located in the garden-house of the Paikpara Rajas at Belgachia.

The performance of *Ratnavali*, which was repeated quite a number of times, is memorable for another reason also. It led the great Bengali poet, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, to write his first work in Bengali—a drama. We learn from the *Bengal Hurkaru* and *India Gazette* that the first performance of this work—called *Sarmistha* took place on September 3, 1859. Its last performance took place on September 27, and the *Hurkaru* wrote :—

The *Sermista* was performed, for the last time as we understand before the holidays, on Tuesday evening last, at the little private theatre erected by the Rajahs Pertab and Isser Chunder Singh at their Belgachia Villa. A selected number of the European and Native friends were invited by the Rajahs to witness the performance. Among the company were present the Hon'ble J. P. Grant, Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Mr. and Mrs. J. P. Grant Junior, Dr. and Mrs. McPherson, Major Plowden, Private Secretary to the Lieutenant Governor, Mr. O Piffard, and Mr. H. P. Hinde of the Supreme Court Bar, Mr. Sith Apear, Moonshree Ameer Ally of Patna notoriety, Baboo Rajendra Lal Mitter, a numerous and fashionable attendance from the depot at Dum Dum and many other native and European gentlemen. (September 29, 1859, Thursday)

There was no other performance at the Belgachia Theatre, which came to an end with the untimely death of Rajah Issur Chunder Singh on March 29, 1861.

Michael Madhusudan Dutt rightly observes in the preface to the English translation of his *Sarmistha* : "Should the drama ever again flourish in India, posterity will not forget these noble gentlemen—the earliest friends of our rising national theatre."

## THE METROPOLITAN THEATRE

**T**HE theatres and performances described above comprise the more remarkable instances of the dramatic enthusiasm of the age. But they by no means exhaust the list of theatrical efforts of the time. Contemporary papers are full of allusions to plays and acting among the Bengalis, and most of them welcome this activity as a sign of the progress, which the people of Bengal were making in the field of culture and the arts. "Theatres, as you say," wrote Jatindra Mohan Tagore to Michael Madhusudan Dutt, "are really *springing up like mushrooms*, but unfortunately, they are as short-lived also; still they are a good sign of the times, for it is evident that a taste for the Drama is gradually spreading itself among us." This note is struck by every one, who has to announce some new theatrical venture. And these latter must have been quite numerous.

There is, however, one performance among these, which deserves more than a passing notice. It was organized by Keshub Chunder Sen and his circle, and as was to be expected adopted as its subject one of the burning social questions of the day—widow remarriage. The drama selected for the performance was *Vidhava-vivaha Natak* by Womesh Chandra Mittra which had come out in 1856. The first performance came off on April 23, 1859, after a dress rehearsal on the 16th, at the splendid structure at Sinduriapati, Chitpur Road—known as Ram Gopal Mullick's house (now razed to the ground) and occupied by the Hindu Metropolitan College. The dramatic club, which staged the play also called itself the Metropolitan Theatre, and the following account of its performance was published in the *Bengal Hurkaru* of April 27, 1859 (Wednesday):—

*Performance of the Bidhoba Bibha Natak* :—The first performance of this drama took place on Saturday last at the late Hindu Metropolitan

College. It commenced at 8 p.m. and lasted till 3 o'clock in the morning. The audience numbered about 500 individuals. The Natuck depicts in vivid but true colours the dangerous and evil consequences resulting from a perpetual state of widowhood, to which the Hindu females are subjected, in consequence of a cruel custom, not founded upon religion....Amongst the whole set the part performed by a *Tole Pundit*, *Turkolankar*, and by Sockhomoyes elicited most admiration. But whilst naming some of the actors, the others were not devoid of merit, which is evidenced by the fact, that notwithstanding the length of the performance, none of the audience quitted the place before the close of the play....The stage scenes were very well got up, much better than was expected....Much credit is, however, due to the Proprietor Baboo Mooraly Dhar Sen and to the other gentlemen who took an active part in the management. It was suggested by some of the audience that the female characters should be represented by the persons of that sex.

The play was repeated on May 7, 1859. The songs of the piece were written by Dwarkanath Roy and set to music by Radhikaprasad Datta, a well-known singer of Hatkhola, and the scenes were painted by one Mr. Holbein.

Keshub Chunder Sen took an important part in staging this play. His biographer, P. C. Mazoomdar, writes :

By repeated representations of Hamlet, and other performances half musical, half dramatic, Keshub had developed such a talent for stage management, that the gentlemen who projected this Company, most of them our relatives and neighbours, seniors to us in age, implicitly trusted Keshub with the sole charge of the new undertaking....The performance...produced a sensation in Calcutta, which those who witnessed it can never forget. The representatives of the highest classes of Hindu society were present. The pioneer and father of the widow marriage movement Pundit Ishwara Chandra Vidyasagar came more than once, and tender-hearted as he is, was moved to floods of tears. In fact there was scarcely a dry eye in the great audience...Keshub, as stage-manager, was warmly complimented on his energy and intelligence, and we, his friends, as amateur actors, who had done our best, also received our humble share of praise.

## THE PATHURIAGHATTA THEATRE

THE dramatic activities described above assured for the Bengali theatre a more stable existence. The time for a public theatre, it is true, had not yet come. But the interval between the opening of the Belgachia Theatre and that of the first public theatre in Bengal in December, 1872, was so continuously filled up with well-organized amateur theatres, that to all intents and purposes they served the purpose of permanent theatres. The first of these was the Pathuriaghatta Theatre, established in 1865 by Babu (afterwards Maharaja Sir) Jatindra Mohan Tagore at his own house and it opened with the performance of *Vidyasundar* in December. Even before this the Tagores of Pathuriaghatta possessed a theatre on the first floor of the old house of Gopimohan Tagore in which *Malavikagnimitra* was staged in the early part of 1860, Chota Raja—Saurindra Mohan Tagore, appearing in the role of Kanchuki. It was performed a second time on July 7, 1860. The organizer of this theatre was Jatindra Mohan Tagore's younger brother Saurindra Mohan, and it was not very long-lived. We find Jatindra Mohan writing in 1860 :—

...as for my brother's stage, I am afraid that *Malavika* must be the first and the last drama that is represented there.

To come back now to the new stage erected by Jatindra Mohan Tagore at his own residence, where *Vidyasundar* was performed on December 30, 1865. Kishori Chand Mitra tells us that the poem was dramatized by Raja Jatindra Mohan, who revised it and eliminated all indecent allusions from it. This book was supplemented by an amusing farce *Jeman Karma Temni Phal*. This play was staged in honour of the Maharaja of Rewa, who had been invited by Jatindra Mohan to his house.

*Vidyasundar* was staged about a dozen times in the Pathuriaghatta Theatre, of which Ghanasyam Basu was the Hony. Secretary. *The Bengalee* of January 13, 1866, in the course of a long and appreciative description of the second performance, which took place on the 6th of that month, observed :—

When we left we only wished that the female characters could be represented by women ; for all the time we were painfully alive to the demoralizing tendency of boys and young men throwing themselves into the attitude, the gestures, motions and even the voluptuousness of women. But as under existing circumstances of native society it is not possible to have any but courtezans to join the *Corps Dramatique* we must choose the lesser of the two evils.

After this, a farce, called *Bujhle-ki-na*, was staged in the Pathuriaghatta Theatre on December 15, 1866. This was a satire on the spirit of the coterie so prevalent in Bengali society. *The Bengalee* wrote on the 22nd following about the performance :—

...*Boojela Keena* was undoubtedly a great success as the frequent applause and loud roars of laughter testified. With the exception of two or three, the actors acquitted themselves creditably. The principal characters were admirably sustained and the effect of the whole was telling...Indeed some of the *Dolloputties* who were present at the acting, looked thunder as the plot developed. We hope the spirit has been completely cast out of them and that Bengalee society will now have peace.

*Malati madhav*, translated by Ramnarayan Tarkaratna, was next staged by the Pathuriaghatta Theatre on February 6, 1869. This piece was performed there about a dozen times.

At the beginning of 1870 the Pathuriaghatta Theatre staged two more farces by Ramnarayan—*Chakshudan* and *Ubhay-sankat*. There were no performances at this theatre till January 13, 1872 when *Rukmini-haran* and *Ubhay-sankat* were acted. On the 10th February following there was a repetition of this performance. Ramnarayan

Tarkaratna states that *Rukmini-haran* was performed about a dozen times at the residence of the Maharaja.

There was only one more performance at the Pathuriaghata Theatre which needs special mention. On February 25, 1873, Lord Northbrook, the Viceroy, visited the mansion of the Pathuriaghata Raj. The occasion was celebrated by a performance of *Rukmini-haran* and *Ubhay-sankat*. The *Hindoo Patriot* of March 3, 1873, writes about this performance :—

On Tuesday last His Lordship honoured the Hon'ble Raja Joteendra Mohun Tagore Bahadur, with a visit to witness the private theatricals at his family residence. The Raja spared neither expense nor trouble to give a fitting reception to the Viceroy. The street leading to his house was lined with gas light by the erection of two rows of pipes and a crown burning over the gateway erected on the top of the road. The house was beautifully and tastefully decorated, the passage to the theatre from the steps on the entrance below to the doors of the room being carpeted with red cloth, and the walls lined with red and green calico and adorned with flags and flowers. A miniature garden was improvised for the occasion on the quadrangle or the courtyard, the effect of which was not a little heightened by the stream of gas light, pouring from the small jets, which looked like so many shining stars in the firmament. The room in which the theatre was held was adorned with several exquisite pictures, some of which were masterpieces of art. The Company was select. There were His Excellency the Viceroy, the Hon'ble Miss Baring, the Marquis of Stafford, His Honour the Lieutenant-Governor, several Members of the Executive and Legislative Councils, Secretaries to Government, and other big wigs, together with a fair sprinkling of ladies and native notabilities. The Viceroy was received in right oriental fashion. His Excellency was on his arrival received at the gate by the noble host, when a band of *nohubut* welcomed him with its sweet strains. The whole passage both below and upstairs was lined with mace-bearers *en hoc genus omne*, who made salutations as His Excellency passed. As soon as His Excellency entered the hall of reception the native orchestra struck "God save the Queen!" with native instruments. The brother of the Raja had prepared an English translation of the airs played by the orchestra, which was put in the hands of the European guests to help them in understanding the music. The drama selected for performance was *Rukmini-haran* or the Capture of Rukmini, an episode from the Mahavaratha. The amateurs acquitted themselves

very creditably, the last two Acts were particularly interesting, and the actors were repeatedly cheered by the audience. The Viceroy was greatly pleased with the orchestra, and on the closing of the drama examined the different instruments, and expressed himself highly delighted with what he saw and heard. In fact he carried away a very good opinion of native music. A farce, called the Two Horns of a Dilemma, which depicted the evils of bigamy, was next played. During the interval the party adjourned to supper, when they feasted their eyes with the beautiful scene of the quadrangle. A synopsis of the Drama and the farce in English being got up by the host, the distinguished visitors were enabled to follow the performance pretty intelligently. After the theatricals were over, His Excellency the Viceroy thanked the actors personally, and also the host for the excellent entertainment he had provided. He then took leave of the native gentlemen assembled, and bade good night to the host.

The achievement of the Pathuriaghatta Theatre is summarized by the *Hindoo Patriot* in the following words :—

For an example of the cultivation of rational amusement of the drama and music, among the educated natives of Bengal, we point with pride to the Pathuriaghatta Theatre. (15th January 1872).



## THE SOVABAZAR PRIVATE THEATRICAL SOCIETY

THE Sovabazar Private Theatrical Society was the second amateur theatre of this epoch. The first play staged by it was Michael M. S. Dutt's *Ekei ki bale Sabhyata*. The first performance took place on July 18, 1865, while the second performance came off on the 29th. The *Hindoo Patriot* had a lengthy notice on the latter performance, in course of which it observed :

The time has not we fear yet come for a National Theatre, but when such respectable and influential families, as the Paikparah Rajahs, the Shobha Bazaar Rajahs, the Tagores, and the Jorasanko Sings get up private theatres at their own expense and under their own management, a taste for the drama is likely to spread rapidly among the community, and a generous emulation will be engendered for the revival of this ancient institution of the country.

The *Hindoo Patriot* was not very pleased with the choice of the play, for it remarked :—

This farce is undoubtedly one of the happiest productions of the fertile brain of the gifted poet. It is a life-like picture of Young Bengal, full of sallies of wit and humour, and written in graceful though familiar Bengalee. But sincerely as we admire the powers of the dramatist, we must candidly confess that this farce is not a fit subject for representation on the stage of a 'Family Theatre.' In faithfully portraying the peculiarities of Young Bengal, the poet has necessarily depicted habits and practices, which are equally shocking to good taste and morals, and which for the sake of propriety and decorum ought not to have been reproduced on a Family Theatre. (July 31, 1865).

The Chairman of the executive committee of this theatrical society was Kaliprasanna Singh. For some unknown reason he severed his connection with it before its staging of Michael M. S. Dutt's *Krishnakumari*, and many other patrons followed his example. The remaining members of the society, however, carried it on, and on February 8, 1867 performed the *Krishnakumari*. Both the acting and the play were highly spoken of by the *Hindoo Patriot*.

## THE JORASANKO THEATRE

THE Jorasanko Theatre was the third of the four more notable theatres of the period. The leading part in organizing it was taken by Gunendra Nath Tagore, Jyotirindra Nath Tagore, and Saradaprasad Ganguli. The idea of "projecting a theatre" was suggested to them by Gopal Uriah's *jatra*, as we learn from a letter of Jyotirindra Nath. They were helped in this task by Krishna Behari Sen (brother of Keshub Chunder Sen), Akshay Chaudhuri and Jadu Nath Mookerji, who constituted into a "Committee of Five" for the purpose of supervising the arrangements and selecting the pieces. Among them Krishna Behari Sen, who had acted the part of the student in *Vidhava-vivaha* Natak, became the teacher.

The first play staged by this theatre was Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Krishnakumari*, after which it took up the same author's well-known farce *Ekei ki bale Sabhyata* ?

The want of suitable and educative plays was felt very keenly by this group of actors, and at last their Committee of Five approached Isvar Chandra Nandi, a former tutor in the Tagore family, and Head Master of the Oriental Seminary, for choosing a subject for a social drama. When this had been done, an advertisement declaring a prize for a drama on Hindu Polygamy was put in the *Indian Daily News* in June, 1865. A little while after, however, this notice was withdrawn as the Committee was able to secure the services of Pandit Ramnarayan Tarkaratna the well-known playwright, and declared two fresh prizes for two plays about "The Hindoo Females,—Their Condition and Helplessness" and "The Village Zamindars." The drama which Ramnarayan wrote for the Jorasanko Theatre was

*Naba-Natak*, and got a prize of two hundred rupees in a silver vessel at a public meeting held on May 6, 1866 at the mansion of the Tagores of Jorasanko over which Peary Chand Mittra presided.

The play was staged on January 5, 1867 and was a great success. The *National Paper* wrote on January 9, 1867 (Wednesday) :—

*Jorasanko Theatre*.—On Saturday night last we had the pleasure of witnessing the Jorasanko Theatre, established at the family house of Baboo Gonendra Nauth Tagore, grandson of late Baboo Dwarka Nauth Tagore. The subject of the performance was the celebrated *nobo natoek*... the acting on the stage, which was pronounced by all present on the occasion to be of the most superior order. To choose out one or two or more amateurs for especial commendation, would we fear, be doing gross injustice to the rest, each acquitted himself so creditably. Beginning with the graceful bow of the *natee*, the representation of every succeeding character, elicited loud shouts of applause from all sides, and rendered the whole scene an object of peculiar amusement to the audience. The concert was excellent. It had no borrowed airs, and was quite in keeping with national taste.

The piece was performed nine times within a short time. The famous actor Akshay Kumar Majumdar appeared in the role of Gabesh Babu. Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi, afterwards famous as an actor, was charmed with the acting and used to say : "It was the performance of *Naba-Natak* that has taught me all that I had to learn, see and hear about acting."

The Jorasanko Theatre came to an early end in the same year. A letter of Jyotirindra Nath written from Ahmadabad about this time giving a brief account of the origin of this theatre will be found interesting :

14th July [1867]

Ahmedabad

My dear Goonoodada,

It is but a few days ago that I received a letter from yourself and one from Jodoo [Nath Mookerji] ; and I have already replied to them. You can't expect any letters to reach you. at least in less than 10 days.



## THE BOWBAZAR VANGA-NATYALAYA

**T**HE Bowbazar Vanga-Natyalaya was the fourth and last of the famous theatres of the age, and was established through the efforts of Chunilal Basu and Baladeb Dhar. Both of them were talented actors and are said to have previously acted in the Pathuriaghata Theatre. Nilkamal Mitra of Allahabad was one of its proprietors. The well-known playwright Manamohan Basu wrote dramas for this theatre, which was at first housed at the residence of Govinda Chandra Sarkar in Visvanath Matilal Lane. The theatre opened with *Ramabhishek Natak* by Manamohan Basu towards the beginning of 1868. A play-goer from Barnagore wrote about the second performance in the *National Paper* of March 25, 1868 :

There being varieties of opinion as regards the performances lately made by the Bow Bazar Theatrical Association on the *Ramavisek Natak* ; as a spectator, I beg my observations thereon be made known to the public through the medium of your Journal, to do justice to the parties concerned....The stage was exceedingly beautiful, inasmuch as money can make it and the scenes are in accordance with its requirements : Secondly the visitors were well received and welcomed. Thirdly the actors were elegantly and suitably dressed and lastly the whole performance was excellent. The part acted on, being very pathetic, was not agreeable to many, but the actors were not wanting in their skill, for almost every gentlemen present were obliged to bring out their handkerchief to prevent tears spoiling their clothes.

By a critical observer some defects can be found, such as, Naut was not a good songster. Chitra was not of feminine complexion and the like, but some allowance must be given considering that my remark was on their second day's act, and very likely have by this time been rectified.

Manamohan Basu's *Sati Natak* was then presented by the same theatre on their newly-built stage at No. 25, Visvanath Matilal Lane on January 17, 1874. The performance was a great success and it was repeated several times.

Towards the end of 1874 Manamohan's *Harishchandra Natak* was staged here.

Pratap Chandra Banerji was the Secretary of the Bowbazar Vanga-Natyalaya.

The amateur theatres described above were the more important ones of the period. But they by no means exhaust the list. This was an age of incessant, but to a very great extent ephemeral—dramatic activity. Almost the sole occupation of the idle rich of Calcutta was to start amateur theatres. The *Rahasya-Sandarbha*, a Bengali monthly, wrote in Samvat 1923 (1866-67) while reviewing a new play, called *Durvikshya-Damana-Natak* :—

We have now a hailstorm of plays...to our discomfiture. Since every lane has a theatre of its own, the writing of plays is the rage among all idle people....Everybody passes off as a drama whatever he likes to produce. And there are even such people who can waste paper by treating famine as a theme for a play. We suppose, after this, fever and cholera will come in for their turn as the subject matter of dramas.

It is not possible to give here a complete list of all the plays and dramatic performances of these years. But a short selection may be attempted of the more important ones :

In 1868 the Baghbazar Natya-samaj staged Girish Chandra Banerjee's *Induprabha*. We learn from the preface of the book that the songs of this play were set to music by Kshetra Mohan Basu, the President of the theatre. This play was repeated several times.

*Padmavati* by Michael Madhusudan Dutt was performed thrice in 1865 or earlier at different places. Another performance of this play, so long believed to be the first, took place on September 14, 1867 at the house of Jaychand Mitra at Garanhatta.

In June (?) 1866 occurred the performance of *Sitar Vanabasa*, or the Exile of Sita, by Umesh Chandra Mitra, at the house of Nilmani Mitra of Bhowanipur. A letter

published by the *Bengalee* on July 7, 1866 gives an account of this play. The correspondent writes :—

...is it not gratifying to see, on the one hand, the encouragement lately given to Sanscrit Literature, and on the other, the revival of the dramatic spirit in Hindu Society ? The same ardour which for the last few years is unconsciously driving our countrymen to seek pleasure as well as instruction in the contemplation of exact imitations of reality, has now turned into a more active principle. Look at the many dramatic performances which have already taken place in Calcutta during the last six months. Look again at the innumerable dramatic works which have lately come out of the Vernacular Press. They all prove that the Bengalees have already appreciated the truth that the Press and the stage alone will secure India's regeneration. All well-wishers of our country ought therefore to encourage by every possible means all dramatic publications and performances.

Entertaining these convictions, I welcome with extreme joy the first performance of a tragedy, entitled 'the Exile of Seeta', at Bhowanipore. On the whole, the performance was worthy of our best commendation. That 'tender eloquence', those sympathetic eyes, and those cheering, winning looks, which so admirably distinguished Seeta, while dejected by misfortune, were all faithfully represented by our delineator. The mimicry of the comic characters of Soudhatoke, Vaudyuna and Kunchooke too, with all their exhilarating wit and merry justiciation, was deserving of the highest credit. But the principal defect of the performance was the Nutty. She betrayed an over-nicety, a pertness which shocked the feelings and disgusted the patience of many. Nor was the delay in the appearance of some of the actors on the stage less tiresome... but as to the success of the dramatic effect and object of the performance, I have not the least doubt....

*Sakuntala* was again performed in July, 1867. Kishori Chand Mitra writes :—"In July, 1867 *Sakuntala* was performed for the second time in Calcutta. It took place at the house of Kalikrishna Pramanik at Kansaripara, but with no better success than at Simla." But the *National Paper* in its issue of July 10, 1867 gives a more favourable account of this performance :—

Theatres are still in the rage. We had one lately at Kasaree Parah which is pronounced by competent authorities to be very satisfactorily got up. The scenes were all well drawn up, costumes graceful and

characters most of them up to the mark. The Orchestra would admit of much improvement. Next to one or two theatres this is most favourably spoken of.

On November 2, 1867, *Kichhu Kichhu Bujhi*, a farce written by Bhola Nath Mukherji, was performed at the residence of Hemendra Nath Mukherjee, (son-in law of Maharshi Devendra Nath Tagore) at Koilahata, Jorasanko. This was a reply to the farce—*Bujhle-ki-na*, performed at the Pathuriaghata Theatre. The stage for this performance was built by Dharmadas Sur, and the parts of Dantabakra, Murad Ali and Chandanvilas were acted with great credit by Ardhendu Shekhar Mustafi alone.

On May 9, 1868 the Thanthania theatre (Krishna Chandra Deb's house, 222, Cornwallis Street?) staged a play entitled *Enrai Abar Barulok* (And these are our Leaders!) It was a satire on the drunken habits of Young Bengal, and the acting was described by a spectator as of a fairly high order.



## THE PRELUDE TO THE PUBLIC THEATRE

**I**N the account given above I have made no mention of one theatre, because, as the parent of the public theatre in Calcutta, it has a special place in the history of the Bengali stage. This was the Baghbazar Amateur Theatre, later called the Syambazar Natyasamaj. At the time when amateur theatres were springing up on every side, some young men of Baghbazar thought they too would have a theatre of their own. Among them were Nagendra Nath Banerjee, Girish Chandra Ghosh, Radhamadhav Kar, Ardendu Shekhar Mustafi—all of whom later became famous as actors. The leading role was taken by Nagendra Nath Banerji. The first play staged by this theatre was *Sadhabar Ekadasi* by Dinabandhu Mitra, its first performance having been given on the Durga Puja day of 1868 (?) on an improvised stage in the house of Prankrishna Haldar of Durgacharan Mukherji Parah, Baghbazar. This play was repeated several times.

The second play put forward by this theatre—then styled Syambazar Natyasamaj, was the same author's *Lilavati*. After long preparation *Lilavati* was staged on May 11, 1872 (Baisakh 30, 1279 B.S.) at the house of Rajendra Nath Pal of Syambazar. *Lilavati* was a resounding success, and was repeated on the two Saturdays following on the same stage. Though the resources of this theatre were very limited and its stage decorations not as rich as had been seen in some of the previous amateur theatres, the quality of the acting was so high that it drew crowds of spectators, some of whom had to be turned away for want of room. Newspapers wrote with sympathy and appreciation of the efforts of this group of young enthusiasts. This

not wholly expected success brought into the mind of some of the organizers the idea of a public theatre, admitting spectators by tickets which would be sold at fixed prices. The story of how this idea bore fruit in the public theatre of Calcutta belongs to the next phase of the history of the Bengali stage and will be told in the next chapter.

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## FIRST BENGALI PUBLIC THEATRE IN CALCUTTA

**C**ALCUTTA did not have her first Bengali public theatre till her amateur theatricals were nearly half-a-century old. This seems all the more surprising because the people of Calcutta were as good 'theatre-fans' in those days as they are 'cinema-fans' now. Whenever there were amateur performances in the houses of rich men who nursed the theatre as their hobby, they invariably drew full houses, and more people had to be turned away for want of room than could be allowed to see the pieces. This was perhaps good in one way, because it gave a foreign importation sufficient time to be acclimatized under the care of men of taste and education before being handed over to less discriminating patrons. And by not allowing the supply to press too close upon the demand, it made that demand strong and robust enough for sustained achievement later on.

However that might be, from the sixties of the last century onwards we find evidence in the newspapers of a growing demand for a Bengali public theatre. People complained about the casualness of the amateur performances and about the restricted facilities for admittance to them. The editorial remarks with which the *National Paper* (edited by Nabagopal Mitra) welcomed the first Bengali public theatre in Calcutta give a very good idea of the public disgust on that account. They were :

Theatres and Operas are not a few in number in this city. If not now, at least some time ago, they were as thick as blackberries—if we may use such an expression. Every street and every lane could boast of one such institution. Nor were these Theatres of ordinary merit. Some were of excellent character. But they were all private undertakings set on foot by individual gentlemen. Except the friends and relatives of the projectors none did else enjoy the benefit, or the privilege

of witnessing them.... The National Theatre is the first public undertaking of its character. The promoters of it deserve our sincere thanks for making it a *fait accompli*. The doors of the National Theatre are open to the public. Whoever shall pay for admission to it will be permitted to go in it. (11 Decr., 1872.)

The credit for this achievement belongs to a group of young men of North Calcutta, or, strictly speaking, Bagh-bazar. They were great enthusiasts for the theatre. They had also started an amateur dramatic club, and it was their want, rather than abundance, of resources which was responsible for a theatrical venture more ambitious than any that had been seen before. To this group belonged Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi, Girishchandra Ghosh, Matilal Sur, Nagendranath Banerji and others, almost all of whom later became celebrities of the Bengali stage. One of the earlier pieces staged by them (which, incidentally, was Dinabandhu Mitra's *Lilavati*) was unexpectedly and sensationally successful. This brought about a rush of theatre-goers to their stage which they, with their limited means, were utterly incapable of coping with. To satisfy their admiring clients, therefore, it was proposed by some that the theatre should be decently established by selling tickets and converting it into a public stage. A name—the National Theatre—was also suggested at the time. All fell in with the idea at once, with, however, one important exception. This exception was Girishchandra Ghosh. He argued that as they had no money to equip a stage which could properly be called the national theatre of Bengal, it would be presumptuous to assume the name and sell tickets to the public. The others, however, were not prepared to listen to this counsel of perfection. They thought that, since an imposing building and stage were beyond their means, they should begin the work with what resources they possessed. This view prevailed in the end, and the preparations were

set on foot. In a fit of pique Girishchandra left the group and stood severely aloof.

This, however, did not prevent the others from carrying on. They had already been rehearsing Dinabandhu Mitra's famous piece, *Nildarpan*. The rehearsals were continued at the house of Bhuban Mohan Neogi of Baghbazar, with encouragement from Sisir Kumar Ghosh, the editor of the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, Manomohan Basu, the well-known playwright and editor of the *Madhyastha*, Nabagopal Mitra, the editor of the *National Paper*, and other notabilities of the Bengali literary world. The dressrehearsal of the piece came off in November 1872, and the first performance on December 7.

The stage was housed modestly in the outer courtyard of the house of Madhusudan Sanyal on the Chitpur Road, which had been engaged at a monthly rent of forty rupees. The stage was erected and the scenes painted under the direction of Dharmadas Sur, the member of the group who had occupied himself with the technique of production as understood in those days. As soon as the preparations were complete announcements were made in the papers. The *Englishman* wrote :

*A New Native Theatrical Society.*—A few native gentlemen, residents of Bagh Bazar, have established a Theatrical Society, named 'The Calcutta National Theatrical Society', their object being to improve the stage, as also to encourage native youths in the composition of new Bengali dramas from the proceeds of sales of tickets. The attempt is a laudable one, and is the first of its kind. The first public performance is to take place on the 7th proximo, on the premises of the late Babu Maddusudan Sandel, Upper Chitpore Road. (20 Nov. 1872.)

In harmony with the unambitious plans of the organizers the tickets were also very moderately priced at one rupee for the first class and eight annas for the second.

The first performance was a tremendous success. All the important parts were divided among the most promising

of the young actors Aishendu Sekhar Mustafi appeared as Mr Wood Savitri, Golok Bose and a ryot, Matilal Sur as Torab and Raicharan, Nagen Banerji as Nabin Madhav, Abinash Kai as Mr Rogue, Amrita Lal Mukherji—better known as Bel Babu—as Kshetiamani, Mahendia Lal Bose as Padi Manani, Amrita Lal Bose as Samindri. The papers were full of praise both of the enterprise and the acting. The *National Paper* greeted the opening of the theatre as an event of national importance and wrote :

The first performance in the National Theatre acted on the night of Saturday last was the *Nal Durgam*. This play has obtained a world wide notoriety in consequence of the incarceration of the Revd. Mr. Long for rendering an English translation of it and adding a preface to it which was considered the most libellous part of the whole work .

The play was admirably performed in the National Theatre. And considering the limited funds which were at the disposal of the projectors considering also the other difficulties under which they labored, we hope the public will join with us when we say that the promoters of the undertaking deserve great credit for having satisfactorily discharged their duties.

All the acts of the drama were satisfactorily performed. But if preference is to be given to one or two or more over others, then certainly we say, that the second part especially its first scene, and the fifth act also its first scene were far better played than the rest. The actors also acquitted themselves admirably well. It would be invidious to draw any distinction between them. But still superior merit, must have its superior reward. And we trust we echo public voice if we give the palm of superiority to the following actors over the rest—amongst the male 1st Torab, 2nd Golok Bose, 3rd Nobinmadub, 4th the Dewan 5th the Ryots, 6th the little boys and among the female, Golok Bose's wife Shorindri, Khettermoni, and Padi Manani. The actings of the females were most sympathetic especially, when Golok Bose's wife played the idiot's part, when Khettermoni grew righteously indignant at the shameful conduct of Raga, the Sahib, and when all lamented over the miserable condition of the Bose's family. Many amongst the audience shed copious tears when they saw the enactment of these parts. Space forbids us to notice the play in detail which we hope to do in our next impression. Suffice it for the present to say that we are highly

satisfied with the manner in which the actors acquitted themselves.  
(Dec. 11, 1872.)

The *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, then published in Bengali, said that "it was no amateur drawing-room acting of fashionable people, whose permanence depended on the caprices of fickle minds and which could hardly expect to satisfy the public craving"; that "the group which had staged the *Nildarpan*, had organized themselves, were selling tickets and wanted to improve the stage with the money received." After this the *Patrika* went on to praise the acting. Others too wrote in the same vein. At the same time, their encouragement was tempered with criticism where they thought the arrangements and the acting left room for improvement. One of the criticisms, for example, was on the score of the musical accompaniment. At the beginning the orchestra was composed of some professional 'Eurasian's, as they were then called, from 'Chunogali'. This, one of the critics thought, was not creditable for a 'national' theatre. The stage management also came in for criticism.

All these remarks were offered sympathetically and in perfect good faith and sincerity by the well-wishers of the National Theatre. There was, however, one exception. In its issues for December 19 and 27, 1872, the *Indian Mirror* published two long letters signed by a "Father" and a "Spectator" respectively, but both obviously from the same hand. The first of these went in for the National Theatre as a corruptor of youth and closed with the peroration that "men who have any concern for public morality and seek the welfare of their children at heart, shall never cease to discountenance a company which has nothing but its project to recommend." The second ran to the following effect :

Sir,—Without pausing to enquire whether Schlegel, as the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* states, or there were others before him who endowed the immortal works of Shakespeare 'With a more vivid immortality,' I

would solicit the favor of a corner in your valuable paper to consider if the players of the National Theatre infused a new life to 'Nildurpan' on Saturday last '21 Dec.]

Invited by puffs and placards, I took one of the front seats in expectation of a rich repast, when the curtain rose and the concert began its inharmonious tune. It ceased at last—and sweetly ceased.

Up goes the drop-scene next, and out comes the rickety stage with its repulsive hangings. The boards have evident marks of festive white ants, and the hand of a genuine Koomartooly artist was traceable in every line of the paintings. But let us pass these by ; though one may ask a 'question queer,' yet let us pass these by. Let us wink at the defective entrances and exits, and let us overlook the grotesque impersonations. It would be to my purpose to confine myself to the actings of the principal parts only at which, on a former occasion, the tender-hearted Editor of the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* shed a shower of tears.

and so forth.

The malice of this attempted feat of fine writing is as obvious as its self-consciousness. Both internal and external evidence seemed to point to Girishchandra as the author. He had raised the only dissentient voice and had left the group because his opinion had not been accepted. He could thus hardly be expected to be pleased with the success of the venture for which he had been predicting complete failure. But then it ought to be said that he was not afraid to attack openly. He composed a lampoon about the National Theatre in Bengali and avowed its authorship, even taking the trouble to explain its broad jokes later at a maturer age. The organizers of the National Theatre, however, took it good-humouredly.

The performance of *Nildarpan* was repeated on December 21. Between the two performances came the staging of *Jamai Barik*, also by Dinabandhu Mitra and dealing with the evils of *Kulinism*. This comedy, as is well known, is almost a farce in its uproarious humour, and the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* said that "it was as entertained by *Jamai Barik* as it had been saddened by *Nildarpan*." The *Nationul Paper* wrote that "on the whole we are glad to



notice the decided improvements of the Theatre. 'The outward fittings up of the stage were more orderly than before. Lights were furnished in a better style than before. Seats were better arranged. The band played national tunes, and it was so done by Lucknow men. Agreeably to our suggestion, no smoking or other indecencies were permitted within the compound of the Theatre House' (Decr. 18.)

The second performance of *Nildarpan*, as has already been pointed out, came off on December 21. But it did not take place till after a political interlude. As soon as the report of the performance reached the *Englishman*, it wrote :

A Native paper tells us that the play of *Nil Darpan* is shortly to be acted at the National Theatre in Jorasanko. Considering that the Revd. Mr. Long was sentenced to one month's imprisonment for translating the play, which was pronounced by the High Court a libel on Europeans, it seems strange that Government should allow its representation in Calcutta, unless it has gone through the hands of some competent censor, and the libellous parts been excised. (20 Decr. 1872)

Civil Disobedience had not been invented in those days. Besides, the hostility of the *Englishman* was then a serious affair. So the Secretary of the National Theatre used discretion and wrote the following letter to the Editor of the *Englishman*, which appeared on the 23rd December :

Sir,—With reference to your remark in the *Englishman* of the 20th instant on the *Nil Darpan*, which is to be acted at the National Theatre this evening, allow me the liberty to say a word or two with a view to remove the erroneous impression which may be produced in the mind of the European community in consequence of the acting of the play. The object of the promoters of the National Theatre in acting the play of *Nil Darpan* is simply to represent village life, as beautifully depicted in it. The libellous portions contained in the work in question have been omitted.

I have, moreover, to state on behalf of the Theatrical Society that, in acting the play of *Nil Darpan* and other plays, they have simply in mind the entertainment of the public by the performance of Bengali dramas. It is far from their object to traduce the character of

Europeans, whose sympathy with, and encouragement to, the undertaking, they would hail with the greatest pleasure. I am glad to say that many European gentlemen have already expressed their appreciation of the movement by being present on the occasion of the last performance at the National Theatre.

Nogendro Nauth Banerjee,  
Secretary.

Even after the performance one of the directors came upon the stage and explained the guiltlessness of their motives in almost identical language.

Three other plays of Dinabandhu Mitra were staged by the National Theatre on three successive Saturdays. They were *Sadhabar Ekadasi* (Decr. 28, 1872), *Nabin Tapaswini* (Jany. 4, 1873) and *Lilavati* (Jany. 11). Though these pieces are some of the best examples of Bengali dramatic literature, the exclusive dominance of Dinabandhu in the repertory gave rise to some criticism. The *National Paper* wrote :

We further recommend the managers to ask such men as Pundit Ramnaryan, or Baboo Manomohan Bose, either to translate or to compose original dramas on classical subjects. The play of *Nil Durpun* was of course a fit subject (barring of course such portions in it wherein the author puts sublime expressions in the mouths of the *dramatis personae*—sublime expressions totally unsuitable to the time, place and occasion in which they are uttered) for representation on the National Stage...We earnestly request the promoters of the National Theatre to choose better subjects than those they have already selected for representation on it. We are aware that they labor under considerable difficulties in this direction. We have very few good dramas in the Vernacular language, but among those which we already have can they not pick up better ones than they have already hit upon. We for one would recommend the acting of the play of *Kolinair Kul Surbosho* or *Ramavishaik*. They are fit subjects for play. (25 Dec. 1872.)

The directors of the National Theatre seemed to have anticipated the objection, for in the same issue of the *National Paper* while announcing *Sadhabar Ekadasi* they explained :

We are further desired to state that the promoters of the Theatre intend soon to get good dramas written by competent authors. In the meantime they are compelled by sheer necessity to perform such play or plays as they have got ready, cut and dry.

All these performances were generally praised. A fact that impressed critics was while, in the days of the amateur theatricals, the preparations for staging a single play often took several months, the National Theatre could present a new play every week. This was due to the device, introduced by the National Theatre, of having a "prompter." An interesting sidelight is thrown on the temper of the theatre-going public of the times by the account given by the *Patrika* of the performance of *Lilavati*. It is mentioned that while the hero and the heroine were making love on the stage in highly emotional verse, some of the spectators shouted to them in English "Lovers should stop their love-making." This gives the *Patrika* an opening to discuss the difference between plays meant to be read and those meant to be acted.

Till now the National Theatre had been performing on Saturdays only. After *Lilavati* they introduced the innovation, now become a custom, of having performances on Wednesdays as well. The first Wednesday performance took place on January 15, 1873. The play was *Biye Pagla Buro*, again by Dinabandhu, accompanied for the sake of variety by some pantomimes, with one exception all satirical. After this performance the *National Paper* wrote :

On Wednesday night last the theatre party played the Drama entitled the 'Bea Pagla Buro' of Rai Dino Bundoo Mitter with a Pantomime which was for the first time played with great success. We were much pleased with the actings of the old man and his widowed daughter. Rota the barber's son with the cunningness usual to his caste enjoyed the most hearty praises of the audience.

The Pantomime was played with better skill and success than what we expected. The comic representation of the Native Civil Service was most attractive. (Jan. 22, 1873.)

The pantomime last referred to was meant to satirize a freak of the then Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Sir George Campbell, who had established a school for the lower grades of the service at Hughly to fit them for work as 'Sub-Deputies.' This school was intended to teach the probationers mathematics, surveying, chemistry, riding, swimming and other odds and ends with a view to making them efficient Government officers. It was looked upon as a joke in Bengali society, and the satire was immensely enjoyed.

Among the other pantomimes was an item called "Mustafi Sahib ka Pucka Tumasha." It was a retort to the caricature of the Bengalis by a man named Dave Carson. This Dave Carson was a good mimic and he entertained the Anglo-Indian (old style) society of Calcutta by a caricature of the "Bengali Baboo" at the Opera House, which he called "Dave Carson Sahib ka Pucka Tumasha." Ardhendu Sekhar turned the table on him by appearing on the stage with three dark companions in European clothes and singing the following song to the accompaniment of the flute, violin and other instruments :

The merry Christmas is at hand  
Sherry Champagne let us try  
And how 'twill be a joly land  
When pegs begin to fly.

Oh what a cheerful eve  
Let us all the high way cry  
And how happily we shall live  
When pegs begin to fly.

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হাম বড়া সাব হায় ডুনিয়ামে  
None can be compared হামারা সার্ট—  
Mr. Mastfee name হামারা  
চাটগাঁও ঘেরা আছে বিলাট—

Rom-ti-tom-ti-tom &c.

গর কি মালেক আদমি কি মালেক  
 Lord of all hy—ham—  
 নেই সস্তা নিগাস বাট্ মেরা tolerate  
 চুনায গলি মেরা ধায়—  
 Rom-ti &c.

Dirty Niggers I hate to see  
 বড়া ময়লা উঃ বাপ রে বাপ  
 Holway pills হাম কয়েঙ্গে রাট্কে।  
 Health রাখনে মেরা সাফ্  
 Rom-ti-tom &c.

Coat পিনি Pantaloon পিনি পিনি মোর trousers  
 Every two years new suits পিনি  
 Direct from Chandny Bazar—  
 Rom-ti-tom &c.

চিংড়ি fish and কাঁচা কেলা the only Hazree once I eat  
 চারপাই is my palang posh, Morah is my Royal seat  
 Rom-ti-tom—

Chorus—

I am a gentleman.

This is not the only instance of the aptitude of Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi for the comic. Comical roles had a great fascination for him and showed him at his best. This was recognized both by his colleagues and the contemporary public. As a correspondent wrote in the *Indian Mirror* for Jan. 22 :

THE COMIC POWERS OF THE NATIONAL THEATRE...First of all came in the *Bia Pugla Booro Bor*. The principal character in the farce, Rajeeb Baboo, was represented by Baboo Audhoredro [Ardhendu] Mustaphy. From his first appearance on the stage, the applause was general and uninterrupted. It were endless to describe each particular beauty of the performances of this exquisite actor. The manner in which he rushed in, pursued by a gang of wicked country lads who pelted him with two lines of poetry for which he had a particular aversion, and restored to them with the full-mouthed asperity of a monomaniac, was admirable. Those to whom it has ever fallen to attempt an imitation of the ways and habits of others, must know how its difficulty increases in proportion to the oddity of those ways, and

their dissimilarity to truth and nature, as we find them about us...The eye, the action, the changes of voice and expression, the slow gait, the feeble motion, and the assumed vivacity were exactly what one would expect to find them. But the master was 'in his art' when, lying down alone in his bed, he expatiated in a beautiful and well paused soliloquy on the prospect of the forthcoming nuptials, which opened on him like a new Elysium...The 16th Jany. 1873.

Similar testimonies are also found in the writings of his friends.

This was followed by the second performance of *Nabin Tapaswini* on January 18. After this the National Theatre announced a play by Ramnarayan Tarkaratna for January 22, when there occurred a dispute among the organizers of the theatre. The cause of this dispute was most probably monetary. The original idea of the founders of the National Theatre was to devote the profits to the improvement of the Bengali theatre and drama. But the financial success of the venture must also have raised the question of personal remuneration and other matters in which the directors were personally not wholly disinterested. We know from contemporary accounts that the proceeds of the first night were four hundred rupees, of the second two hundred and fifty, and that of the third, four hundred and fifty. The subsequent performances must also have been equally profitable. There was thus a fair sum of money to account for and control, and, as a correspondent in the *Indian Mirror* says, it was this which led to the dispute. This correspondent writes :

Owing to a long existing ill-feeling among the members of the National Theatrical Society a disagreement has arisen amongst them. The cause of this faction, as the Secretary of the Society announces, is the failure on the part of the Treasurer to render the accounts. The other party ascribes the cause of this faction to some shortcoming on the part of the Secretary...(26 Jan.)

Whoever was really responsible, as the result of it, the performances had to be postponed, and the *National Paper* wrote on Jan. 22 :

## SOME PLAYWRIGHTS AND THEIR PLAYS

AMRITA LAL BASU

|                         |     |                |
|-------------------------|-----|----------------|
| Hirakchurna Natak       | ... | 1875           |
| Chorer Upar Batpari     | ... | 1876, 11 Octr. |
| Tiltarpan               | ... | 1881, 4 Jan.   |
| Brajalila               | ... | 1882, 30 Nov.  |
| Dismiss                 | ... | 1883, 20 Feb.  |
| Vivaha Bibhrat          | ... | 1884, 9 Dec.   |
| Chatujyeh o Banrujyeh   | ... | 1886           |
| Tajjab-byapar !         | ... | 1890, 2 Aug.   |
| Tarubala                | ... | 1891, 2 Feb.   |
| Vilap !...              | ... | 1891, 22 Aug.  |
| Sammati-sankat*         | ... | 1891           |
| Raja-bahadur            | ... | 1891           |
| Kalapani...             | ... | 1892           |
| Bimata ba Vijay-Basanta | ... | 1893           |
| Babu                    | ... | 1894, 27 Jan.  |
| Ekakar                  | ... | 1894           |
| Bow-ma                  | ... | 1897, 11 Jan.  |
| Gramya Bibhrat          | ... | 1898, 2 Feb.   |
| Harishchandra†          | ... | 1899           |
| Sebas Atash             | ... | 1900, 18 Feb.  |
| Kripaner Dhan !         | ... | 1900, 9 June   |
| Adarsha Bandhu          | ... | 1900, 5 Aug.   |
| Jadukari                | ... | 1901, 30 Jan.  |
| Vaijayanta-bas          | ... | 1901, 2 Feb.   |
| Navajiban               | ... | 1902, 25 March |
| Avatar                  | ... | 1902, 2 April  |
| Bahaba Batikt†          | ... | 1904           |
| Sebas Bangali           | ... | 1906, 28 Jan.  |

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\* Included in the works of Amrita Lal. It originally appeared in a monthly named *Majlis* for Magh-Falgun, 1297 B. S. It was never published in book form.

† Included in the works of Amrita Lal though he was only its publisher.

‡ Included in the works of Amrita Lal. It does not appear to have ever been published in book form,

|                 |     |                 |
|-----------------|-----|-----------------|
| Khas-dakhal     | ... | 1912, 28 April. |
| Navajauvan      | ... | 1918            |
| Byapika-viday   | ... | 1926            |
| Dwandey Matanam | ... | 1926            |
| Jajnaseni       | ... | 1928            |

## DINABANDHU MITTRA

|                        |     |               |
|------------------------|-----|---------------|
| Nil Darpanang Natakang | ... | 1860          |
| Nabin Tapaswini Natak  | ... | 1868          |
| Biye Pagla Buro        | ... | 1866          |
| Sadhabar Ekadashi      | ... | 1866          |
| Lilavati               | ... | 1867, 17 Dec. |
| Jamai-barik            | ... | 1872          |
| Kamaleh Kamini Natak   | ... | 1878, 18 Sep. |

## DURGADAS KAR

|                       |     |      |
|-----------------------|-----|------|
| Swarnashrinkhal Natak | ... | 1868 |
|-----------------------|-----|------|

## GANENDRA NATH TAGORE

|                     |     |              |
|---------------------|-----|--------------|
| Vikramorbashi Natak | ... | 1869, 1 Jan. |
|---------------------|-----|--------------|

## HARA CHANDRA GHOSH

|   |     |      |
|---|-----|------|
| Bhanumati Chittavilas<br>(after <i>Merchant of Venice</i> ) | ... | 1858 |
| Kaurava Viyoga  | ... | 1858 |
| Charumukh Chittahara  | ... | 1864 |
| Rajatagiri-nandini  | ... | 1874 |

## JOGENDRA CHANDRA GUPTA

|                   |     |                   |
|-------------------|-----|-------------------|
| Kirihivilas Natak | ... | 1852 (1258 B. S.) |
|-------------------|-----|-------------------|

## JYOTIRINDRA NATH TAGORE

|  |     |                  |
|--|-----|------------------|
| Kinchit Jalayoga !                                       | ... | 1872             |
| Puruvikram Natak   | ... | 1874, 9 July     |
| Sarojini...  | ... | 1875, 30 Nov.    |
| Eman Karma ar korbo na<br>(afterwards <i>Alik Babu</i> ) | ... | 1877             |
| Ashrumati Natak  | ... | 1879, 4 Nov.     |
| Manmoyee   | ... | 1880 (1802 Saka) |



|                          |     |                |
|--------------------------|-----|----------------|
| Swapnamoyee Natak        | ... | 1882           |
| Hataath Nawab            | ... | 1884           |
| Hiteh Biparit            | ... | 1896           |
| Punarvasanta             | ... | 1899, 14 March |
| Abhijnan Sakuntala       | ... | 1899, 18 Octr. |
| Basantalila              | ... | 1900, 29 March |
| Dhyan-bhanga             | ... | 1900, 15 April |
| Alik Babu                | ... | 1900, 18 April |
| Uttar-charit             | ... | 1900, 7 June   |
| Ratnavali Natak          | ... | 1900, 26 Sept. |
| Malati-madhav            | ... | 1900, 29 Sept. |
| Mrichhakatik             | ... | 1901, 8 March  |
| Mudra-rakshas            | ... | 1901, 10 March |
| Vikramorvasi             | ... | 1901, 4 June   |
| Malavikagnimitra         | ... | 1901, 15 June  |
| Mahavir-charit           | ... | 1901, 8 Octr.  |
| Chandakaushik            | ... | 1901, 4 Dec.   |
| Venisamhar Natak         | ... | 1901, 14 Dec.  |
| Prabodh-chandroday Natak | ... | 1902, 24 March |
| Nagananda                | ... | 1902, 1 Aug.   |
| Dayeh poreh Dar-graha    | ... | 1902, 16 Sep.  |
| Rajatagiri               | ... | 1904, 21 Feb.  |
| Biddha-salvanjika        | ... | 1908, 20 Dec.  |
| Dhananjay-vijay          | ... | 1904, 3 March  |
| Karpuramanjari           | ... | 1904, 23 April |
| Priyadarshika            | ... | 1904, 23 May   |
| Julius Caesar            | ... | 1907, 28 Octr. |

## KALIPRASANNA SINGH

|                        |     |             |
|------------------------|-----|-------------|
| Babu Natak             | ... | 1853        |
| Vikramorvasi           | ... | 1857, Sept. |
| Savitri Satyaban Natak | ... | 1858        |
| Malatimadhav Natak     | ... | 1859        |

## KIRAN CHANDRA BANERJEE

|               |     |               |
|---------------|-----|---------------|
| Bharatmata    | ... | 1873, 28 Aug. |
| Bharate Javan | ... | 1874          |
| Gopan Chumban | ... | 1878          |

## MADHUSUDAN DUTT

|                         |     |                |
|-------------------------|-----|----------------|
| Sermista Natak          | ... | 1859, Jan.     |
| Ekei ki bale Sabhyata ? | ... | 1860           |
| Buro saliker ghare ron  | ... | 1860           |
| Padmavati               | ... | 1860           |
| Krishnakumari Natak     | ... | 1861           |
| Mayakanan               | ... | 1874, 14 March |

## MANOMOHAN BASU

|                      |     |                        |
|----------------------|-----|------------------------|
| Ramabhishek Natak    | ... | 1867                   |
| Pranaypariksha Natak | ... | 1869, 27 Sep.          |
| Sati Natak           | ... | 1878 (18 Magh<br>1279) |
| Harishchandra        | ... | 1874                   |
| Nagashramar Abhinay  | ... | 1875, 28 Jan.          |
| Parthaparajay        | ... | 1881, 12 March         |
| Rasila Natak         | ... | 1889                   |
| Anandamay Natak      | ... | 1890                   |

## NAGENDRA NATH BANERJEE

|                    |     |               |
|--------------------|-----|---------------|
| Malatimadhav       | ... | 1870          |
| Sati ki Kalankini* | ... | 1878, 10 Sep. |
| Parijat-haran      | ... | 1875, 8 March |
| Gurkud Natak       | ... | 1875          |
| Kinnar Kamini†     |     |               |

## NANDA KUMAR ROY

|                          |     |      |
|--------------------------|-----|------|
| Abhijnan Sakuntala Natak | ... | 1855 |
|--------------------------|-----|------|

## NIMAI CHAND SEAL

|                    |     |               |
|--------------------|-----|---------------|
| Kadambari Natak    | ... | 1864          |
| Enrai abar Baralok | ... | 1867, 12 Nov. |
| Chandrayati        | ... | 1869, 26 Jan. |
| Dhrubacharitra     | ... | 1872          |
| Tirthamahima       | ... | 1878, 9 Dec.  |

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\* It has wrongly been included in the works of Amrita Lal Basu.

† Given in the catalogue of the Baghbazar Reading Library, though the title-page of the book is missing.

## PRIYAMADHAV BASU

|              |     |      |
|--------------|-----|------|
| Bujhlo-ki-na | ... | 1866 |
|--------------|-----|------|

## RAMNARAYAN TARKARATNA

|                         |     |               |
|-------------------------|-----|---------------|
| Kulin Kulasaryasya      | ... | 1854          |
| Venisamhar Natak        | ... | 1856          |
| Ratnavali Natak         | ... | 1858          |
| Abhijnan-Sakuntal Natak | ... | 1860          |
| Jaman Karma Temni Phal  | ... | 1865 ?        |
| Nava-natak              | ... | 1866          |
| Malatimadhav Natak      | ... | 1867, 18 Nov. |
| Ubbay Sankat            | ... | 1869, 19 Nov. |
| Chakshudan              | ... | 1869, 25 Nov. |
| Rukminiharan Natak      | ... | 1871          |
| Swapnadhan Natak        | ... | 1873, 8 Nov.  |
| Dharma-vijay Natak      | ... | 1875, 18 Sep. |
| Kamsabadh Natak         | ... | 1875, 6 Dec.  |

## SATYENDRA NATH TAGORE

|  |     |               |
|--|-----|---------------|
| Sushila-Birsingha Natak                        | ... | 1868, 2 March |
| (adapted from Shakespeare's <i>Cymbeline</i> ) |     |               |

## SAURINDRA MOHAN TAGORE

|                    |     |              |
|--------------------|-----|--------------|
| Muktavali Natika   | ... | 1858         |
| Malavikagnimitra   | ... | 1860         |
| Rasaviskar-brindak | ... | 1881, 2 Feb. |

## SISIR KUMAR GHOSH

|               |     |      |
|---------------|-----|------|
| Naysho Rupea  | ... | 1872 |
| Bejaror larai | ... | 1878 |

## TARACHARAN SIKDAR

|            |     |      |
|------------|-----|------|
| Bhadrarjun | ... | 1852 |
|------------|-----|------|

## UMESH CHANDRA MITRA

|                      |     |      |
|----------------------|-----|------|
| Vidhaba Bibaha Natak | ... | 1866 |
| Sitar Vanabas        | ... | 1866 |

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